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ABSTRACT

This address to the National Congress of Parents and Teachers (PTA) discusses programs and services, current knowledge of child development, and national policies relating to child and family development in relation to democratic principles such as cultural pluralism, individual rights, and parent involvement. Conditions which make it difficult for programs to uphold these principles are outlined. Characteristics of preschool programs which are considered desirable are: high quality efficiency, comprehensiveness, universality, flexibility, and continuity. The importance of parent involvement in preschool programs and its effect on the family are emphasized. The PTA's unique role in bringing together the home and the school is noted and specific procedures for improving the home/school relationship are recommended. (CS)

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The Role of Parents in Early Childhood Development

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We live in a wonderful country that continuously rededicates itself to democratic principles. The current expressions of that commitment are seen in many forms. One form is the increased acceptance of the concept of a pluralistic society. This means the different ethnic and minority groups are able to maintain their cultural identities and to have access to societal opportunities without prejudice or discrimination. Another form of the expression of democratic principles is in the new recognition of the rights of individuals. This means that women as wives, homemakers or single parents have equal rights. It means affirmative actions to increase access to education and career opportunities traditionally dominated by men. It means that children have rights which may be honored independent of the family, the school or other institution, such as the right to be protected from abuse and neglect and inadequate education or services. Still, another

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form of the expression of democratic principles is in the growing interest in parent involvement in programs and services affecting their children. This means that parents have the right to participate in the development of policies affecting their children. It means that programs and services are to support the institution of the family. It means that parents must be perceived as the first socializers of their children and as having a concern for the continuity of development of their children. It means that parents - both parents - are the primary agents in the fostering and nurturing of the next generations.

Now, these current expressions of a national commitment to democratic principles require more than recognition and acceptance. They require examination to determine if they lend themselves to various programs and services which permit the successful carrying out of the principles. They also require an examination of present knowledge to determine if these principles lead to the enhancement of human development. Finally, they require examination to determine if they lend themselves to a viable national policy on child and family development. We will examine these things, keeping in mind the critical role of the organization holding this meeting - The Congress of Parents and Teachers. Pluralism, individual

rights, parent involvement - how are these values expressed through programs and services, current knowledge, and national policies relating to child and family development? What role can the PTA play in transforming these values into realities?

Programs and services

Many programs and services exist today which purport to respect cultural pluralism, individual rights and parent involvement. Head Start includes bilingual programs, stresses cultural identity and studies the differing needs of ethnic groups. Some elementary schools are bilingual and provide different patterns of introducing the second language. Health and social services attempt to provide services which recognize cultural and language differences. Programs like Follow Through and Developmental Continuity attempt to meet the needs of different ethnic and minority groups over time.

In terms of individual rights, current programs and services attempt to provide access and opportunity to those individuals who, for a variety of reasons, have been neglected or discriminated against. Child welfare programs, child abuse and neglect programs attempt to protect the individual rights of children as well as of their parents. Compensatory education, both at the preschool level and during the school

years, is honoring the right to equality of educational opportunity for each individual.

In terms of parent involvement, Head Start and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act require parent involvement in programs. In addition, a good many programs encourage parent involvement on a voluntary basis. The PTA is the major national organization that considers the parents as critical in relationship to schools. The fact that the PTA is also able to entertain ideas of parenting education, parent involvement in preschool programs and parent centers at schools, highlights the breadth of vision of the Association. We will come back to that later.

These programs and services make valient attempts to respect the values of cultural pluralism, individual rights and parent involvement, but they are few in number and can act mainly as shining lights. A quick look at the status of programs and services reveals that most of them suffer from conditions which make it difficult to respect the values. These conditions are:

1. Fragmentation. This fragmentation is at all levels of government, federal, state and local, and in other program and service organizations, both public and private. The independent services through hospitals, community health, welfare and

the schools is fragmented. There is no conceptual framework which guides programs and services to see the necessary linkages if human needs are to be met or if the values are to be honored.

2. Single Service. Service provided by separate agencies or single purpose public and private groups, tend to provide only the programs and services defined by the agencies or groups. Further, the focused service is usually provided by personnel who have special training to provide that particular service. Few of these trained personnel look at the variety of needs which must be met. Preschoolers and their families must, in effect, accommodate their needs to the single service structure! There is, then, little possibility of the values being honored.

3. Limited availability. Services and programs are frequently limited to geographic areas having the greatest concentration of resources or with the greatest political clout. Geographically isolated or impoverished localities are frequently neglected. Categorical programs

which limit services to certain economic, ethnic or special category (e.g. [illegible]ntally retarded or developmentally at risk) groups exclude others with equally pressing needs. The effect is discriminatory. The values are not honored.

4. Unstable and discontinuous. Services and programs which are temporary or are responsive to political shifts cannot be counted on to exist over time. This may be good or bad, depending on the quality of the service and its usefulness for consumers. But the unstable aspect of services and programs prevents those concerned with human needs and democratic values from meeting the needs or honoring the values. In terms of discontinuous aspects of services, this refers more to linkages between services at a specific time and such linkages over time. Such discontinuity again ignores the values identified.

5. Crisis oriented. Service tends to be unavailable until a crisis has occurred. The service may come only after the family breakdown, for example, is complete and the service is of

an emergency nature. The role of prevention and correction is completely ignored by this crisis orientation; rather the service becomes available after such permanent damage is done. This is particularly true of preschoolers whose problems can be identified and corrected so that future problems can be prevented. The human needs and democratic values are not adequately met or respected.

6. Unconcerned with the family unit. Services and programs for preschoolers, for example, tend to disregard the family as a unit and deal only with the child - medically, educationally or socially - as an isolated individual. The importance of the family situation and background is ignored; in fact, the family ecology is not seen nor understood.

The desired characteristics of programs and services are those which respect the values of pluralism, individual rights and parent involvement and incorporate the following:

1. Quality - the best possible service
2. Efficiency - eliminates overlap and duplication
3. Comprehensiveness - total range of services and programs

4. Universality - all who need services and programs
5. Flexibility - responsive to individual and group differences
6. Continuity - coordinated and articulated

Current Knowledge

Current knowledge provides few answers concerning the enhancement of human development through recognition of the pluralism of society or the individual rights of citizens. The knowledge that does exist gives conflicting information about the outcome of recognizing the two values of pluralism and individual rights. We do not know, for example, if a child's development is enhanced by being taught first in his or her primary language and introduced to the secondary language later on, or if both languages are best taught together from the beginning of school and preschool. We do know that when children do not understand the language they use in the classroom, they have difficulty learning. But no research is needed to make that finding clear. Just try listening to a lecture or a conversation in a foreign language and you discover the same problem. You may even become a little paranoid about what they are saying.

In terms of individual rights, the current knowledge does not say that recognition of these rights has enhanced

human development. Nor does it say that assuring the rights of children enhances their development. Does removal of a child from an abusing parent and terminating parental rights enhance the child's development? It will stop the abuse - which is important - but a child needs more than being protected from harm. A child needs a continuing relationship with adults, encouragment, emotional support, in addition to protection from harm. Can the troubled family be helped to deal with the problems it has which find expression in poor or damaging child rearing practices? Is it more conducive to child development to work with the total family than to label the parents as child abuser or neglectors and take the child away? What does the child go to? Does the child perceive its own removal from the family as punitive? We deal with the crises and not the consequences. Our current knowledge not only does not provide answers; it is not even asking most of the right questions.

Current knowledge, then, does not contribute much understanding of the benefits of pluralism and individual rights. These values are accepted as basic to democracy and must continue to be honored. What is lacking is evidence of the effective forms of expressing these values to enhance human development. These limitations are not true for parent involvement. There is a great deal of solid

knowledge about the positive contribution of parent involvement for child development, particularly when that involvement begins at the preschool level.

Parent involvement

The concept of parent involvement is more powerful today than ten or fifteen years ago. And research during the past decade and a half has contributed vast amounts of information to show how this enhances not only the development of children but also of the parents themselves. The real beneficiary is the family.

The facts about the family which are important to understanding its impact on the development of preschoolers are these:

a. The family is the primary and most fundamental influence in the preschooler's development.

b. The family provides the basic learning environment for the development of the preschooler's:

(1) curiosity

(2) motor skills

(3) social skills

(4) physical health

(5) language

(6) sense of security

(7) self-esteem

(8) sense of love

(9) coping skills

(10) moral values

c. The family with a low income cannot always provide the experiences necessary for the development of preschoolers. This family experiences a higher frequency of multiple assaults which intensify and complicate developmental problems of children on a multiplier effect.

d. Parent involvement in programs is most effective when:

(1) parents are perceived as teachers of their preschoolers

(2) the family is perceived as a system for delivering to preschoolers the stimulation and support necessary for development and learning

e. Family development is critical to child development. The significant aspects of family development are:

(1) increasing competence in coping

(2) increasing self-esteem

(3) increasing respect for the family's worth as individuals

(4) increasing confidence in the family's potential for continuous development of themselves and their children.

The important points to note in these facts about families is that families are there first in the development of children, must be involved in programs and services which address preschoolers, have a developmental thrust of their own, and are the most enduring aspect of continuity of child development.

Now let's look at what the research says about the parents-child relationship. Study after study identifies critical behaviors of parents that determine to a large extent the development and performance of children. Some of these behaviors are more cognitive in style while others are more emotional in style. Both influence the quality and kind of child performance. The cognitive style of parents include these factors:

1. academic guidance - The parents interest their children in learning and exploring activities and encourage them to ask questions and seek

answers. They encourage their children to take the initiative and praise them for their efforts.

2. cognitive operational level and style - The parents encourage their children to reason and problem solve and test out their ideas with actions. The parents use this cognitive style themselves and provide a model of approach and style.

3. cultural activities planned - The parents structure plans for their children to have cultural experiences and expose them to a large variety of such activities. "Let's go to the zoo." "Let's attend the children's concert." "Let's watch this TV show." These are some of the planning strategies.

4. direct instruction of the child - The parents teache their children how to do a task, how to solve a problem, how to make choices, how to assess results, etc. In addition, the parents observe their children as they are learning and offer suggestions and encouragements as appropriate.

5. <u>educational aspirations</u> - The parents place high value on education and either actively encourage their children to participate in educational activities and goals or simply assume the children will place value on education because they themselves do. This is generally a valid assumption.

6. <u>use of external resources</u> - The parents have their children attend nursery school or kindergarten or they may place them in special summer activity programs, such as day camp. Many children learn to love books not only because their parents tend to love books but also because their parents have encouraged them to participate in "the children's hour" at many libraries.

7. <u>intellectuality of the home</u> - The parents have books and magazines around the home and usually have dictionaries and encyclopedias. The parents are seen reading these books and using them as references. They are also heard discussing what they have read.

8. verbal facility - The parents use their vocabularies effectively to help their children learn. They do not need large or elaborate vcoabularies; they need to use them to clarify expectations and guide progress.
9. verbal frequency - The parents engage their children in conversation during mealtime or on an auto trip or at family gatherings. There is more use of words and universal language then non-verbal signals and contextual language.

The emotional style of parents include these factors:

1. consistency of management - The parents maintain a consistent and therefore predictable style of management or discipline so that the children know what is expected of them and what kinds of limits are clearly established. There are no shocking surprises or uncertainties.
2. differentiation of self - The parents do not confuse themselves with their children. They know where their personality ends and another's begins.
3. disciplinary pattern - The parents behave in their own lives with a sense of self-discipline and an expression of this in their daily

performance. The children accept patterns of behavior expressive of this discipline and imitate the models.

4. emotional security, self-esteem - The parents feel safe and loved and respect themselves as significant individuals. They thus have emotional energy available to provide emotional security to their children and opportunities for the child to develop self-esteem.

5. impulsivity - The parents do not engage in erratic, unpredictable behavior, but rather have their behavior under some rational control without repressing creative thoughts and feelings.

6. belief in internal control - The parents stress the importance of building internal controls rather than relying on external controls. Closely allied to this is the belief in assuming responsibility for their own behavior.

7. protectiveness, babying of child - The parents recognize the dependency of their children and are willing to permit them to act out that dependency. The parents provide the protective, nurturing behavior necessary for children to feel protected.

8. trusting attitude - The parents trust each other and trust their children. They encourage their children to trust others and to be receptive to learning experiences others might provide. Children who distrust others learn in a distorted way.

9. willingness to devote time to the children - The parents plan activities for their children and enjoy spending time carrying out these activities. Parents need to communicate their pleasure in spending time with their children.

10. work habits - The parents demonstrate to their children that they have developed work habits which permit for the acceptance and completion of an activity. The parents would also place value on a high level of performance and quality work. They, in effect, respect what they do.

Parent involvement in programs for preschool children consistently shows that such involvement not only is important for the child's preschool development but is also important for the child's later development. Follow-up studies repeatedly show that parent involvement at the preschool level is predictive of children's performance later in school and up through the grades. This effect on

children's school performance over time is limited primarily by the attitudes and behaviors of teachers. The most powerful evidence for this limiting factor is provided by a longitudinal study supported by the Office of Child Development and carried out by the Educational Testing Service of Princeton, New Jersey.

When looking at third grade children who had strong self-images at the preschool level, the role of the teacher became evident. Teachers who perceived the children as failures and behaved toward them as failures affected the child's self-image in negative ways. However, positive attitudes toward children and feelings that the children can be successful at learning cannot be limited to teachers if children are to benefit over time. Again, ETS has found that children who continue to benefit from preschool experiences are those who experience emotional support and intellectual stimulation both at home and at school.

Home-School Relationship

The importance of developing more effective home-school relationships is underscored by the research. Children benefit from such relationships and families and teachers can benefit too. A number of recommendations are made which are partially based on research evidence and partially on what seems logical and appropriate based on observation

and experience. I am sure the PTA will add creative new ideas to these recommendations. Here are three:

1. Bring the school to the home. The expertise of the school is in learning-teaching. The school has materials, curricula, and a vast array of ideas and skills addressing themselves to the learning-teaching phenomenon. The school may bring these materials, ideas and skills into the home through a home visitor, a resource teacher, a mobile unit. The school personnel may demonstrate activities in the home, leave materials on a lend-lease basis or leave materials appropriate for a TV show. The parents may ask questions, report progress and indeed demonstrate their skills with their children.

   The school could focus much of its attention, as it worked with families, on developing the parent behaviors identified earlier in this presentation that affect child development and performance.

2. Bring the home to the school. Parents should be able to use the school facilities for a number of purposes to help their children.

a. Use the library - Schools need to include library materials directed to parents who wish to select books to read for deeper understanding of their children, to read to their children, or to learn how to do things with their children.

b. Have their children screened - Many children are handicapped by perceptual problems and learning difficulties. Parents take their children to medical doctors for health problems and dentists with dental problems. Teachers should provide preschool as well as in-school screening to identify learning problems. Screening for talent is also an important service the school might provide. Talents and gifts need nurturing from early childhood and many parents either do not recognize the gifts of their children or do not know what they can do to help their children. Some schools are already providing early screening services and guiding parents in readings and activities to enhance the talents of their children.

c. Observe classroom activities - Parents who watch their children functioning in a classroom are able to learn a great deal about how children's learning is enhanced. Indeed, with some guidance from the teachers, the parents may supplement classroom activities in order to reinforce the learning experiences. Often it is the dichotomy between home and school that presents problems to children.

d. Attend cultural activities - The school needs to be a cultural center for families. When children perform in plays, in the orchestra, or have an art exhibit, both they and their parents may share a cultural activity. Indeed some schools involve parents in organizing and planning for cultural activities.

3. Establish community learning centers. As an alternative to the home or the school being the locus for home/school cooperation, a community learning center has been suggested. This concept emerges from the increased awareness that the

whole child and not only his cognitive development must be the focus of our attention if children are to develop to their fullest. A community learning center might have materials on health and physical well-being, might have a pediatrician, a psychologist and an educator. Parents would bring their children to the center for diagnosis and screening to identify problems and receive help. At the same center, the parents might be provided with materials, books, and guidance in using them with their children. The entire family could attend activities together in the evening or on week-ends and extend the children's learning experiences in a larger social community.

Many of these recommendations are in operation or are in the process of being implemented. All of the services must, of course be used at the option of the parents. But there seems little risk that such services will not be used. Parents have become extremely sensitive to their role in enhancing the development of their children, to the need for early identification of problems and early stimulation of development. These parents are increasingly looking to schools and other community resources to help them.

The PTA has a unique role in brining together the home and the school because, in effect, its charge is to do exactly that. Only in the past few years, however, has the picture been made clear of the importance of parent involvement with children at the preschool level and in interaction with the school. The PTA, as the major organization involving parents, can provide dramatic leadership in this effort. And incidentally the PTA can express the democratic values of pluralism, individual rights and parent involvement.